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AUTHOR Stern, Caroline
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ABSTRACT

Writing portfolios, which provide samples of a student's writing over a period of time, are an excellent vehicle for giving faculty a new resource for teaching students self assessment. Since the portfolios include concrete evidence of a variety of writing assignments, students also learn that writing is a developmental process. This development can be most provocatively demonstrated by having students look at their first assignment next to one near the end of the course, an activity which tends to convince even skeptics that they are improving. To institute a course that involves student peer evaluation, a diversity of assignments is the most useful. The initial assignment should be open to students, allowing them to demonstrate their own strengths and weaknesses, and may include a self-assessment as writer. Students must be taught the language and vehicles of assessment, meaning that criteria should be spelled out clearly. The teacher's goal should be to establish, announce, model and use the criteria for evaluation throughout the term. Students should, near the end of the term, prepare their portfolios for classroom use. After careful self-assessment, the student and teacher negotiate long and short term writing goals for the student. The overall process shows students that they can take ownership of their learning to become writers, and student end-of-term comments illustrate the usefulness of portfolios, especially in showing students how they have progressed in concrete terms. (HB)

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Student Writers Practicing Self- Assessment

a paper presented at the

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by Caroline Stern, Assistant Professor

Dept. of Langauges & Literature

Ferris State University

Big Rapids,MI 49307

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Anyone who has ever grasped a bike seat and volunteered to be human training wheels for a youngster learning to ride a two-wheeler will understand the work it takes to teach a new skill. To follow the bike analogy, part of this job certainly involves giving instructions between gasping for breath and balancing the bike with your hand. Fatigue usually gives the teacher the motivation to make the next move which is to take his or her hand off the back of the seat, but if the teacher is like most, he or she will continue to run behind the bike a few more times as though still providing the safety support. The crucial stage comes when the learner discovers that he or she has been pedaling without the teacher's guiding and supporting hand.

Typically the teacher will tell the pupil something like "You can do it without me! I haven't been holding on for the last three times down the driveway." The student's confidence is reinforced by this past success. Confidence plays an important role in everyone's ability to successfully perform a task and as teachers we have not fully done our job unless we help our students build enough confidence in their own abilities for them to move forward without our constant feedback and support. To follow the analogy, we need to give students the skills and confidence to not only pedal down the driveway without us, but to turn corners and cross intersections.

Writing portfolios provide an excellent vehicle for doing just that since they give faculty a new resource for teaching students self assessment. Because the portfolio provides samples of the student's writing over a period of time, students can accumulate concrete evidence to help them determine their own patterns of achievement and error. This is particularly important for student writers since many of them are concrete thinkers and need a body of evidence to convict them of their errors and convince them of their achievements.

The writing portfolio also provides a diagnostic window on the students' affective learning in terms of how flexible and persistent pupils are in developing their own writing in response to suggested pre-writing strategies, teacher feedback on previous essays, goal setting and their

own writing improvement over a number of assignments. Since the writing portfolios include concrete evidence of a variety of writing assignments and all stages of the writing process, students learn what teachers already know: writing is a developmental process.

The developmental aspect of writing can be proven to the students by having them assess their own first day writing sample in comparison to writing done in the middle and at the end of the term. With a little guidance from the teacher, students should be able to review the contents of their own writing portfolios and see concrete evidence of the progress they have made. Advertisers of diet products and cosmetics have long understood the powerful motivation comparison and contrast can offer, and portfolios provide student writers with the same type of motivational evidence that should give them the confidence to continue learning and improving as a writer.

As a teacher using the portfolio system, I didn't anticipate the power of placing a student's first day writing next to his or her mid-term essay until I conferenced individually with my students as part of the portfolio review process. Before using writing portfolios, I saw a student's writing as "snapshots" of their abilities, but when I collected all stages of the student's writing over a period of time, patterns became evident. I could easily see the progress some students were making and the hurdles that impeded the progress of others. But, the challenge was convincing the students of the positive and negative patterns I could see in their development as writers. I found myself telling students things like," See, these essays prove that you aren't making lots of mistakes; you are just making the same few over and over again." or "Look, your paragraphs in this last essay. They are much more detailed than they were in your first and second essays." and even the occasional "You've mastered basic paragraph transitions, let's try something a little more challenging." But I could tell from their glazed-over eyes, polite smiles or knit brows that they were not sharing my epiphany or confidence in their writing abilities."

I could use the writing portfolios to convince these skeptics because the collection of the student's writings record development as well as product. The portfolio provides students with the evidence for them to assess their own progress and therefore become more of a participant In improving their own writing. I understood, especially in the case of basic writers, that students would not make progress as writers until they were convinced that they were capable of success, not because I told them they were, but because their own writings over a period of time convinced them that they had already demonstrated their ability to make progress. It was like the bike analogy. The students had to have confidence in their own abilities if they were going to make a continued effort at learning. People are not willing to work at reaching a goal if they have no confidence in their ability to achieve it. I had confidence in their abilities, but how could I give my students that same vision? Enter the writing portfolio and teaching self-assessment.

GROUNDWORK FOR SELF-ASSESSMENT

Laying the groundwork for self-assessment begins with the syllabus and lesson plan. Writing portfolios must contain a variety of writing products that also require students to produce physical evidence of each stage of the writing process. How can you convince students that they can be good writers unless you practice with them as many facets of writing as possible to determine their writing talents? For example, some of my students could put together a narrative because they had honed that skill by telling stories to their peers, teachers and parents, but they could not complete an acceptable analytical essay. The student writers who came to my class with strong technical backgrounds were often more adept at analysis but were too mechanical in their organization patterns or lacked lively prose style. The non-traditional student writers had the maturity to provide excellent content but were too insecure to move beyond the simplistic formulas for essay, paragraph and sentence structures. The variety of assignments provided a venue for each writer's particular strengths and weaknesses.

Variety refers to not only the mode or modes of writing and the subject matters, but the length of the essay and complexity of logic required to complete the assignments, the length of time between assignment and due date, the level of collaboration and feedback, and the freedom the student had to focus and develop the writing's scope. Planning assignments that offer this diversity to writers gives both teacher and student a more complete resource bank to draw from when they each begin evaluating the process and product of writing. Certainly the writing portfolio could include graded essays, ungraded journal entries, pre-writing exercises, revisions of graded and ungraded drafts, freewritng and brainstorming sheets, and writing done for other classes and peer review responses.

With this commitment to diversity in assignment, the teacher sets the developmental bench mark on the first day of class when students are asked to write a first day essay. The teacher should offer a menu of broad and accessible topics since the student can then be given the challenge to select, narrow, and focus a writing topic that is suitable to his or her interests or ability. The topic the student selects and how he or she focuses it will provide additional clues about his or her writing strengths and weaknesses.

As a separate assignment very early in the term, the teacher should ask students to write an assessment of their individual abilities as writers. This may take the form of an attitude survey, narrative journal entry about the writing experience, or a full length essay with specific topic prompts. The self-assessment should ask the students to think about what they consider to be their strengths and weaknesses as writers and their anxieties about the writing process. This early self-assessment reinforces the idea that thinking about writing is important and will be practiced in the class. This writing should not be graded by the teacher but students should be told that they will be given the writings back at mid-term so they can assess their own progress as writers.

I have been surprised at the responses I have been given. One student wrote, "I am good in English because I contribute to class discussion and turn in all my work. I also have a

very open mind on life." Another wrote: "I am a good writer because I have good structure and lots of ideas and I like English." Still another student wrote," I really don't like writing. It is boring. I've had to do a gang of research papers. I'm good at writing because I turn in all my work and attend every class. I don't do sloppy work either." Writing, to these students, had little to do with composition. Physically building, managing, and editing a writing portfolio would help them to understand otherwise.

TAKING THE TRAINING WHEELS OFF

If students are to learn to self-assess, they have to be taught the language and vehicles of assessment. The teacher should familiarize students with criteria for writing achievement. Certainly the goals should be realistic and clear with articulated short and long term goals for achievement along with the requisite encouragement that it takes for writers to achieve and maintain an interest in improving themselves. Setting these criteria depends on the particular goals of the writing program, the ability and needs of the students, the level of freedom the teacher exercises over classroom content, and instructional support services. Certainly the more individualized these goals are, the more responsive the student will be to achieving them and writing portfolios will help both teacher and student to set individualized goals.

At my university, the faculty have agreed to nine focus areas that we stress from basic through advanced composition. They are organized into three areas, the first of which is Writing Context. This refers to the student understanding and following the writing assignment, having a clear and meaningful purpose in the writing strategy he or she selects, and exercising audience awareness. The second major category is Writing Form which covers essay organization /introductions and conclusions, and transitions, essay development through appropriate and adequate use of details and examples, and logic. The last major category is Language which assesses the sentence structure, grammar and mechanic, and word choice. There is a myriad of possibilities to add to these criteria. For example, some of our faculty members have added categories to measure creativity, documentation style, critical thinking, and collaboration.

The teacher's goal should be to establish, announce, model and use the criteria for evaluation. Depending on the grading requirement for the class, the teacher may wish to assign letter grades, number values or a system of minuses , checks and pluses to measure the student's ability in the different areas. After several weeks in the class, the students should be familiar with how to assess writing models using the announced criteria. It is probably less threatening to the fragile writing egos of some writers if they apply this assessment to essays that are not their own or others' in the class. Somehow, students feel more freedom and safety in analyzing a stranger's writing. Some negative examples can be used to give students the critical eye they will need to begin the assessment process, since some people can more easily articulate what is wrong with a piece of writing than what is right with it. With this accomplished, the teacher has laid the groundwork for the next stage in self-assessment.

Depending on how much time the teacher has with the students and the level of control he or she has over the assignments in the classroom, mid-term is an excellent time to review the first day essay and self-evaluation and start setting those individualized goals for students.

STEADY THE BIKE AND RIDER AND GET READY TO RUN

In preparation for self-assessment, students should organize their writing portfolio documents in chronological order. This means that each assignment should have been numbered and dated when it was written. To facilitate the organization of the portfolio, a teacher should give the students a table of contents listing all of the assignments that are required in the portfolio and the order in which they should appear. For some learning disabled students, color coding the assignments will help them to better organize the portfolio. Students who have lost or never completed assignments should be required to make those missing papers up and place them in the portfolio. This has the duel role of forcing students to get organized and up-to-date. but more importantly, the student should now have before him or her the writing samples that are to be reviewed by the teacher and student together to measure the progress that student has made since the first day essay.

Prior to individual conferences with the student, the teacher should hand back the first day essay - ungraded- and ask each student to revise and rewrite the essay and attach the new copy of the essay to the first day draft. Additionally, the student should write a separate self-evaluation discussing his or her progress based on not only the first day essay, but also of the writing that has taken place in the interim. To prevent students from making vague generalizations such as "I've just gotten better," the teacher should require each students to pull examples from their own writing to demonstrate any claim that is made.

Depending on the success of the format used for self-assessment in the first week of class, the teacher will have to decide how open or closed-ended the self-assessment prompt is at mid-term. I favor asking students to write up their own self-assessment by reviewing the body of their writing and then composing a letter to me discussing the specific changes they have made in their writing and approach to writing. This loosely structured assignment then keeps the students self-focused and gives them ownership of the assessment rather than tempting them to feed back to me, the teacher, the answers they believe I am looking for.

It is important for students to revise the first day essay before completing the separate self assessment essay since the revision demonstrates that they can apply the lessons learned about writing. Reviewing their own writing portfolio to date will provide the student with the evidence of their own development.

Following the rewrite of the first day essay and the writing of the midterm self-assessment, the student should conference with the writing instructor to review the entire portfolio to date. This is when the teacher and writing student together can review the writing samples to look for patterns of achievement and error and talk about the student's affective development as a writer.

I have found that many students are overwhelm by what they see as an enormity of error when really they are repeating a few patterns of errors that account for many of the corrections on the page. Because I have the writing portfolio in front of me , I have the concrete evidence to

convict the student of these patterns and tell him or her that investing time in learning comma rules or paragraph development can remedy a large percentage of the "red marks" on their essays. Likewise I can convince them using their own writing samples from their portfolio of the progress they have made as a writer. That way the sting of correction is tempered with the sweetness of achievement.

Now is the time for both teacher and student to use the information from the portfolio and the self-assessment to negotiate long and short term writing goals for the student. These goals should reflect the concerns and interests of the student as stated in the self assessment thus building on the truths the student recognizes about his or her own writing. In essence, by letting students self-assess, the teacher also allows the student to "buy into" and set the agenda for improvement. Because the student is a participant in the assessment, he or she is more likely to become an active learner. The portfolio is the evidence of the need for diagnosis and treatment and the proof that the cure can work.

NO SAFETY WHEELS OR GUIDING HANDS

At the end of the term, students should be asked to once again repeat the revision of the first day essay and midterm rewrite along with completing another self-assessment based on the samples in the writing portfolio. The teacher should still not be involved in directly grading the first day essay or self-assessment since both should have total student ownership. The purpose is to demonstrate to the student writer that composition is something he or she can take ownership of and more importantly, improvement of writing skills is something he or she must take responsibility for and ownership of if he or she is to continue improving as a writer beyond the scope of the class.

My students have provided me with some enlightening end of term assessments such as," I was afraid I would not be able to pass this class....I had a head full of exciting stories and

examples, but the problem was that I had them all clogged up. I knew exactly what I wanted to write, but when I put it on paper, I wouldn't know where to put what. I had so many interesting ideas to put in my paper that I would be having run-on sentences without even knowing it....I'm still having problems with run-on sentences, but I'm taking care of that."

Another student wrote in her self-assessment letter to me," I have learned how to brainstorm by sorting out my thoughts on a topic. This helps me get ideas and write them down before I forget them. I've also learned how to make an outline and organize my writing for better essays because I know what the reader wants to read...I know the areas I need to work on and I pay really close attention to that."

Still one other student summed it up by saying," I have a lot of strengths and weaknesses in my writing; in fact, I am starting to gain more strengths and a lot less weakness in my papers. I still use comma splices and run-ons, but those problems are starting to decrease."

These end of term evaluations were prompted by the writing portfolios that gave students concrete evidence of their progress as writers. Because they could see the progress, they could believe the progress and that gave many of them the confidence to continue their growth as writers. For me it was the equivalent of seeing them zoom down the road on their bikes without training wheels and without me running breathlessly behind them.